

US Politics Comprehensive Exam Questions March 2014

If this is your *major* field, you must choose TWO (2) questions from the CORE and one question from each of your SUBFIELDS, for a total of FOUR (4) questions. The questions are of equal value. The exam must be completed in FIVE (5) hours.

The exam allows a great a deal of choice in the substantive topics you deal with. However, you should avoid extensive repetition of topics or analysis from one answer to another.

US Politics Core (Choose two questions)

- 1) Do organized interests dominate over the mass public when public policies are made? Discuss the conditions under which the answer is affirmative and negative, respectively. Make sure to discuss how Congress, the President, and bureaucracies are affected by interest groups and public opinion.
- 2) Recently, presidents tend to implement their policy agendas in a unilateral fashion—often taking actions that apparently exceed their previously established statutory or constitutional authority. Use the literature on presidential decision making, presidential influence, and other aspects of American politics to develop an explanation of this tendency. What does any relevant history or literature suggest about how other institutions will respond to such a trend? What can we expect about the president’s unilateral role in the next decade or so?
- 3) What role does the “electoral connection” play in the polarization in Congress? In addition, discuss how partisan polarization in Congress has affected its relationship with other branches—the President, the bureaucracy, and the Judiciary—of the federal government.
- 4) Identify two important puzzles or areas of limited understanding about US politics—one concerning some aspect of elections, public opinion, or mass behavior; and one concerning some aspect of policymaking institutions. For each one, discuss relevant literature and observations to show that a puzzle—some seemingly unexpected behavior—exists. Briefly suggest theoretical considerations, a research design, or both, that might help to explain the puzzling behavior. (Take one puzzle at a time.)

US Politics: Political Behaviour (Choose one question)

- 1) It is puzzling that there is any policy responsiveness at all given that American electoral choice seems dominated by Race and the Economy. Should we be puzzled?
- 2) At the level of individual behaviour, what is the relative importance of long-term and short-term factors in attitude formation and candidate choice?

US Politics: Media (Choose one question)

- 1) Provide a critical inventory of the features of the institutions, personnel, technology, or economic structure of the U.S. news media that (on arguments that are least credible) could shape media behavior with significant consequences for US politics. That is, discuss four or five of the most important possible effects. In each case, use whatever theoretical and/or empirical considerations you find pertinent to ascertain which ones are, and which are not, actually important. What, if any, reasonably feasible changes to any of these features could have constructive consequences for the functioning of the U.S. political system? (For this last point you need not hit all four or five effects)
- 2) How does the literature on media bias relate to the literature on media effects? Has the literature examined the biases that might exist with respect to the aspects of media content that actually affect politics? Briefly review both literatures and their relevant findings to assess how well they match up in this respect. Identify and elaborate on two distinct areas where further work is needed to enhance our understanding of the systematic tendencies of media performance that affect political processes in the US.